



# AMBS window

## Responding to Scripture with art

**Karl Stutzman, MLS, Assistant Director of Digital Library Services**

When I started Mary Schertz's Biblical Spirituality course in Fall 2014, I thought that biblical spirituality had mostly to do with being well-read in the Bible: reading it as regularly as possible in a devotional fashion. It took me until partway through the class to realize that I was equating biblical spirituality with a kind of biblical consumerism: reading more of the Bible, more regularly, as a magic solution to my inner need.

The class began to chip away at my biblical consumerism through our weekly practice of artful response to the "quest stories" in Luke's gospel. We used a variety of art supplies—pens, paints, markers, colored paper—to write down the text we were studying. There was a kind of repetition and slowing down in this process that flew in the face of my desire to consume.

We worked with the same text multiple ways. First, we would read it before class and write about it in our journals. Then we would work with the text in a class discussion. Then we would write it down, and discuss what

new angles we saw in the text after we wrote it. Inevitably, through this careful chewing on the text as a class, we would arrive at fascinating, creative new insights.

Following a mid-semester trip to visit family in Canada, I did a make-up artful response from the class session I had



missed. I did it together with Silas (age 6) and Junia (age 3). We were focusing on the Zacchaeus story from Luke's gospel.

Doing artful response with children was an eye-opening experience. Engaging children in the biblical text helped me as an adult see it with more wonderment and joy. After experiencing the creativity of children writing and

drawing in response to the text, I was able to see Zacchaeus in a new way. Zacchaeus was short, but he wanted to see Jesus. He worked around that restriction in a joyful, childlike, creative way by climbing the sycamore tree.

Children's creativity comes from their daily knowledge of their limits—of physical stature and capability, of cognition, of power in the family system. Jesus recognized this childlike character in Zacchaeus immediately. I needed to allow room for a more childlike appreciation of faith and the Bible.

The Spirit of God moves when we slow down and begin reading and responding to Scripture together with people of various ages and abilities. •

**Top:** Sara Wenger Shenk (left), AMBS president, explores a book with Karl Stutzman's family: Karl and Twilla Epp-Stutzman, his wife, and their children, Silas and Junia. Karl is a part-time AMBS student, pursuing a Certificate in Theological Studies, in addition to his role in the library. Twilla earned a Master of Divinity at AMBS in 2005. **Inset:** Artwork by Karl, Silas and Junia.

# Engaging Scripture through artful response



## Mary Schertz

Brené Brown is a professor of sociology at the University of Houston who has done research on vulnerability. Those who let themselves be vulnerable are those who are wholehearted. It is the opposite of perfectionism, an ability to be creative, playful and courageous. It is messy—and life-giving.

I suspect that wholeheartedness has a lot to do with the gospel. I suspect it has a lot to do with Jesus's encouragement to consider the lilies and the birds of the air. It also has a lot to do with artful response to the text. In my Biblical Spirituality class at AMBS, we spend time in conventional Bible study, but we always reserve time to respond to the text artfully.

That means writing the text, taking it in hand, illustrating it, experimenting with it. Or it means singing, composing, woodworking, drama or storytelling. The medium is not as important as getting into the spirit of artful response. Responding artfully means wading into our discomfort zone. It means playing

in ways we have not let ourselves do for decades. It means giving up product for process. It means letting the Spirit have sway in our moment.

Finally, artful response returns us to the biblical text, with new insight and appreciation—new insight and appreciation for God's word, to be sure, but also new insight and appreciation for what we have learned from those who share our pilgrimage on this voyage into the Word.

— *Mary Schertz, PhD, is professor of New Testament at AMBS. She also is director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies at AMBS and co edits Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology.* ●

## Rachel Miller Jacobs

Artful response in congregations can involve side-by-side individual work with a biblical text and art supplies. Another mode—one that's especially suited for *communal* work—is acting out the biblical text.

There are many ways to do this, depending on the size of the group, its joy in movement and/or improvisation, and its age composition (a few lively children are a real boon!). Costumes and props, even "bad" ones (whatever's lying around the house or the church will do), are a great help.

1. While the text is read, people "sculpt it" (find a pose and hold it). You can take photos for a slide show that can be viewed while the text is read.
2. Act out the text while it is read.

3. Actors embody the text and speak words from the text.
4. A group is given a brief text and acts it out or tells the story or riffs on it. The literal text is released and the "artful response" is a comment on it.
5. Using a well-known story, interview characters in it. Brainstorming beforehand will help, so people have some place to start.



Artful response is valuable for congregations because it helps slow down our reading. It invites us to rehydrate the Bible's beautifully spare words and claim them as our own. It encourages us to laugh with each other and to learn how much we need each other—this is very clearly a group project! It cultivates an imaginative, playful and curious attitude toward the Bible, which is key in its becoming real to us and us becoming good conversation partners with it.

— *Rachel Miller Jacobs, DMin, is assistant professor of congregational formation. Her thesis grew out of her experience with and passion for reading the Bible in community.* ●

## AMBS Window Fall 2014 Volume 25 Issue 1

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## ALUMNI NEWS



**Titus Oyeyemi (Master of Arts: Peace Studies 2003)** visited AMBS recently, announcing that he has published a new book, *Evaluating Peace Education: A Study of Nigerian Jr. Secondary Schools*, available from Lambert Academic Publishing.

**Daniel Liechty (Master of Arts: Peace Studies 1978)**, professor of social work at Illinois State University, serves as a founding board member for the Victim Offender Restoration Program (VORP) of McLean County.

**Rick Stoner (Master of Arts in Mission and Evangelism 2009)** was installed as pastor at Sharon Mennonite Church, Plain City, Ohio, Sept. 7.

**Jeff Hochstetler (Master of Divinity 2014)** was installed as family life pastor at Berlin (Ohio) Mennonite Church, Sept. 28. ●

# Art assignments open Scripture in new ways

Two fall classes at AMBS asked students to engage artfully with Scripture or biblical themes. Biblical Spirituality, taught by Mary Schertz, and Art in Worship, taught by Malinda Berry, gave students opportunities to discover new insights or dimensions by working with paper, paints, crayons, fabric and other artistic tools.

Two of the students in the Art in Worship class reflect on their experiences. ●



“I never considered myself as an artist and I immediately experienced intimidation in the face of a blank sheet of paper while in thought of offering a sketch. The Art in Worship class allowed me to realize the need to become centered in God to experience God as the Creator of the cosmos and to discover the gifts given to creation to experience the possibilities of producing that which is made to inspire us through scriptures. Robin Jensen’s “The Substance of Things Seen” text in the Art in Worship class, with Malinda Berry, inspired me when it suggested arts are one of the ways we understand our world and one of the ways we express ourselves. This offered me the courage to trust what is inspired by the Spirit, whether the art becomes attractive or unattractive. And that settled my fears and offered me encouragement.” – *Ann Jacobs, Master of Divinity student and staff member of Mennonite Mission Network* ●



“One benefit in using artistic expression with Scripture is that familiar words and stories can reveal new impressions and understandings. I was challenged to slow my pace of life and engage with the passage in a more deliberate way, not worrying about getting the art “right,” but instead being encouraged to listen, respond creatively, then see what new insights stood out to me.”  
– *Rhonda Yoder, Master of Arts in Christian Formation student and assistant in the AMBS admissions office* ●

## YOUR GIFTS AT WORK

Pastors Week, an annual gathering of pastors and other congregational and church leaders, explored what defines us as Anabaptist Mennonites and how we can be the church of Jesus Christ today.

Your gifts to AMBS help to make resources like the January 26–29 event possible, bringing to AMBS leaders like Drew Hart (right), pastor, blogger and doctoral student, who spoke at Pastors Week. Other presenters during that week were Janet Plenert, Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, Greg Boyd and David Miller.

AMBS Church Leadership Center coordinates Pastors Week and many other resources—webinars (online seminars), workshops, Anabaptist Short Courses (six-week, non-credit, online courses) and undergraduate ministry study programs. People in long-term ministry, people wanting to enhance their work in the church and people exploring ministry all benefit from your gifts. ●



# AMBS PANORAMA

## Webinar examines funerals

### Funeral Planning: An Anabaptist

**Approach** is a webinar (online seminar) scheduled for Wednesday, April 22, 2:00-3:30 p.m. EDT. The presenter is Janice Yordy Sutter, pastor of worship and preaching, Kern Road Mennonite Church, South Bend, Ind.

## Pastors Week recordings

Listen to **Drew Hart, Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, Janet Plenert, Greg Boyd and David Miller** answer the Pastors Week theme question: "Where culture blurs theology: What is an Anabaptist Christian?" Recordings of presentations and sermons from the January 26-29 event are available on AMBS's iTunes U channel. Visit [www.ambs.edu/news-events/iTunesU.cfm](http://www.ambs.edu/news-events/iTunesU.cfm)

## Follow the Trail of Death

A summer course, available for credit or audit, will follow the Trail of Death, the path of native Americans forced to leave Indiana and settle in Kansas. David B. Miller, associate professor of missional leadership development, and several

members of the Potawatomi Nation will lead the experience. For information, visit [www.ambs.edu/academics/Trail-of-Death.cfm](http://www.ambs.edu/academics/Trail-of-Death.cfm)

## Summer classes

**Hybrid classes**, requiring only one week on campus, include:

- Greek Readings: Synoptic Gospels
- Biblical Foundations for Peace and Justice
- Economic Justice and Christian Conscience

**On-campus classes**, June 1-12, include:

- Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations, taught by Jacqueline Hoover
- Celebrating the Church Year, taught by Rachel Miller Jacobs

Visit [www.ambs.edu/academics/course-descriptions-summer.cfm](http://www.ambs.edu/academics/course-descriptions-summer.cfm)

## Undergraduate ministry program

**Pastoral Studies Distance Education** is a college-level program for active leaders of congregations who don't have college degrees. Five units of study involve the students with mentors and

instructors. Discover more for yourself or encourage an emerging leader in your congregation. Visit [www.ambs.edu/PSDE](http://www.ambs.edu/PSDE) for details.

## The Circle blog

The AMBS Church Leadership Center shares the thinking of people scheduled for workshops and other events on a new blog, The Circle. Pastors Week presenters Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, Drew Hart and Greg Boyd were among the first to share posts on the blog: [www.ambs.edu/thecircle](http://www.ambs.edu/thecircle)

## Tour Egypt next January

Explore Egypt—the biblical narrative and what challenges the church is facing today—with Safwat Marzouk, assistant professor of Old Testament who grew up in Egypt, and Sara Wenger Shenk. Next January, Sara and Safwat will lead a tour, Encountering Egypt: Past and Present, with opportunities to visit sites and meet people for whom the country is home. For information, visit [www.ambs.edu/EncounteringEgypt](http://www.ambs.edu/EncounteringEgypt) ●

# PRESIDENT'S WINDOW SARA WENGER SHENK

**A** friend took me along to an art show by a seminary student, Bethany Tobin, at James Madison University. I'd enjoyed conversations with Bethany, intrigued by how she integrated art and theology. But I was unprepared for how her art would move me.

The show included diverse themes and media. I came to a series called "In Him, all things consist." On a side panel, Bethany described how elaborate patterns, text and bright colors "express the energy, electricity and discovery I felt while making this work. I hope they carry the simple joy (and yes maybe fixation) I have about God, particles, patterns and ideas."

For the series, Bethany used verses from Colossians 1 that picture "the mysterious, cosmic Christ." She spoke of how she's drawn to geometry and physics as ways to "peer into the beauty of God's creation" and how numbers "with their ratios and harmonic proportions are... 'keys to the structure of the cosmos.'"

As I read the panel, glancing back and forth to the artwork, tears welled up.

I continued to read: "As patterns found in the natural world, [numbers] reveal intelligence and purpose embedded in creation. The circle symbolizes wholeness and unity. For me, it all flows from the one who made it all and for whom it all exists—revealed in Jesus Christ."

The Colossians text, she said, "is a 'philosophic constellation' circling the 'concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box; in response, not to a single key of a single number, but to a combination of numbers."

By this point the lock had flown wide open for me. I was weeping. The artwork itself was intriguing, but it was the interplay between artist, text and visual interpretation that stunned me; an "I wish I could build an altar" moment for sure. My husband promptly bought the piece.



How I long for more theologically attuned artists and artistically inclined theologians to break open our well-guarded safe-deposit boxes. ●

**Learn more about Bethany Tobin and her work in relating Christian practice to art theory: [www.jmu.edu/bethechange/stories/tobin.shtml](http://www.jmu.edu/bethechange/stories/tobin.shtml)**